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## THE ORIGIN OF THE ASHMEDAI LEGEND IN THE BABYLONIAN TALMUD

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A WELL-KNOWN passage in Gittin 68a tells of King Solomon that he ruled not only over men but also over demons. He was desirous of obtaining the mythical *shamir*, that by its aid the stones for the building of the Temple might be cut without the employment of iron. So he ordered Ashmedai, the king of the demons, to be brought before him. In connection with this story many anecdotes are told concerning the intellectual superiority and the dangerous power of the demon. The characteristics of Ashmedai as pictured in the Talmud moved S. J. Rapoport ('Erek Millin, *s. v.*) to declare him a kind of Mephistopheles or Solomon's evil spirit who took possession of the king in his old age, after he had shaken off discipline and had become steeped in sin. Israel Lévi (*REJ.*, VIII, 64-73) has established that certain details in the conversation between this remarkable demon and Benaiah son of Jehoiada recall a narrative about "the angel and the hermit" which occurs in various versions of the *Vitae Patrum* (before the eighth century) and in the Koran (XVIII, 64-81). I might add that several witty sayings and apophthegms concerning the blindness of men, which are ascribed to Ashmedai, are found, at least as far as the sense goes, in works of much greater antiquity. Thus Ashmedai is asked: "Why didst thou laugh when thou heardest that a man ordered shoes for himself for seven years?" And he answers: "This man has hardly seven days more to live, and yet he orders shoes for himself for seven

years". In the dialogue between Hermes and Charon, in Lucian, Charon says: "You asked me why I laughed? I had heard something which amused me vastly". Hermes: "What was it?" Charon: "A man who had been invited by one of his friends to dinner for the next day, replied: 'Certainly I shall come', and even as he spoke a tile from the roof fell on him and killed him".<sup>1</sup>

The name Ashmedai, which in the Talmud is given to the mysterious demon, has remained without explanation up to the present time. Kohut has attempted to derive it from the Zendavesta. It is true, a demon with the name of Aeshma does occur there; but James Darmesteter, who is quite trustworthy in this matter, has maintained in opposition to Kohut that compositions of this name with a syllable similar to the second part of our word never occur. Lacking any plausible explanation an attempt has been made (with reference to "Shamdon" in Midrash Genesis rabba, ch. 36) to derive the word from שמד, but this attempt cannot be taken seriously, since there is nothing in the nature of the demon endowed with supernatural power, as he appears to us in the Talmud, to justify such an etymology.

However, I believe I have found elsewhere the origin of the name and the nucleus of the entire legend.

Herodotus tells in the third book of his history how, in the absence of Cambyses, Smerdis took possession of the throne of Persia. The people as a whole considered him as the lawful ruler on account of his likeness to the murdered brother of the king, the son of Cyrus. As Cambyses died far away from his native land, Smerdis remained for seven months in possession of the throne, until a prominent

<sup>1</sup> Luciani Samosatensis opera, *Χάρων ἡ Επισκοποῦντες*. In the Talmud we find another incident besides the one mentioned above; Ashmedai passes a wedding and cries; he sees that the bridegroom will soon die.

Persian, Otanes, grew suspicious that the regent "who never quitted the citadel nor invited any of the noble Persians to his presence"<sup>2</sup> was not the son of Cyrus. Since his daughter Phaedyra was one of the wives of Cambyses, he sent to ask her "whether it was the true Smerdis who visited her as king".<sup>3</sup> To her answer that she had never seen Smerdis the son of Cyrus and therefore could not tell whether the ruler who had also become her husband was identical with him, he replied that she might examine, in his sleep, whether he had any ears. If he has no ears then he is not the royal prince but the magician Smerdis (whom Cyrus had in his life-time deprived of his ears for some atrocious crime). Now let us compare with this what is told in the talmudic legend about Ashmedai. Through his supernatural power he seized possession of Solomon's throne and sovereign authority. When (in the Synedrion) they hit on the idea to investigate whether the true ruler rules, they addressed a query to Benaiah son of Jehoiada, the foremost counsellor, whether the king allowed him to come to his presence. "No", was the answer. Thereupon they questioned the women of the palace whether the king visited them.<sup>4</sup> The women were then ordered to look upon his legs (the legs of a demon are supposed to be similar to the legs of a hen). In this wise the imposture was exposed, and Ashmedai was removed from the throne.

The striking similarity in the appearance and unmasking of the two usurpers makes it almost certain to me

<sup>2</sup> Herodotus, III, 68: *ὅτι οὐκ ἐκάλεε ἐς ὄψιν ἑωυτῷ οὐδένα τῶν λογιμῶν Περσέων.*

<sup>3</sup> *πέμπων δὴ ὧν ὁ 'Οτάνης . . . παρ' ὅτεφ ἀνθρώπων κοιμῶτο εἰ τε μετὰ Σμέρδιος τοῦ Κύρου εἰ τε μετὰ ἄλλου τευ.*

<sup>4</sup> אמרו ליה לבניהו: קא בעי לך מלכא לבניה? אמר להו: לא. שלחו להו למלכותא: קאחי' מלכא לבניכ? שלחו להו: אין, קאחי'. שלחו להו: ברקו בכרעיה. The motive of ears that had been cut off has given place to that of hen's legs.

that the Ashmedai of the talmudic legend was originally, and also in the version that came down to the amoraic period in Gittin 68, none else than (with the omission of *r*) the magician Smerdis, who, as may be seen from Herodotus, exercised the imagination of the people all over the Persian empire through the manner in which he took possession of the throne. In later times the mythical necromancer Smerdai became the king of the demons, and in view of *שְׂדֵה וְשִׁדּוֹת* mentioned in Eccles. 2.8 as being subject to Solomon he was drawn in for the purpose of obtaining the *shamir*. It is not surprising that in Tobit (3.8), which assumedly had been composed in the second or first pre-Christian century, hence more than three hundred years after the events narrated in Herodotus, Ashmedai had become simply the evil spirit. And since here he brings misfortune on the young bride Sarah by repeatedly killing her husbands, he appears also in the Testament of Solomon as causing evil to brides and destroying conjugal life,<sup>5</sup> though this function is not at all in the spirit of the old Ashmedai legend. In other later accounts from the amoraic period, such as in Pesahim 110, he is also brought in connection with various other superstitious notions.

<sup>5</sup> *JQR.*, XI, 20; *Jewish Encyclopedia*, II, 217-220. I cannot agree with L. G., the author of the article, that the legend about Ashmedai's co-operation in the building of the Temple and the holy ring is based on the Testament of Solomon, since the Talmud ignores the other characteristics of the demon occurring in the above source.